

Chapter Two: Behind the barbed wire and barricades ... the view from both sides

January - June 1987

Another New Year, another hangover and another doorstep that morning outside the home of Britain's most famous male soap star ...

The Sun deputy editor Stuart Higgins, nearly always cheerful even when verbally abused by editor Kelvin Mackenzie, had despatched me from Wapping to Fulham. I spoke to Leslie Grantham's wife Jan at their terraced home and, to bring joy to her New Year, confessed I was a freelance ... sent from *The Sun*.

I liked her and was not going to play the game this time to the extent I fudged or lied about my status. That is one reason I was not as 'good' an operator as others.

'Leslie has launched proceedings against your paper,' she helpfully told me. I was thus not best placed to get an interview!

'Happy New Year anyway,' she wished me - and I her. Tail half between my legs, I drove east back to the office.

The Sun was my chief source of income until mid-January until the *Sunday Express* and the *London Daily News* came to rival and overtake it. I shall always appreciate the chance that news editor Tom Petrie gave me even if he realised that I did not make the 'hard-nosed' or rapid output grade necessary.

During one mid-January Sunday shift Tom Newman - another friendly and quite jovial presence on the newsdesk - had me scurrying round Notting Hill and Maida Vale to try to confirm if gay singer Marilyn was dying in a hospice.

Back in the office, having had no success, I tried to speak to singer Boy George's brother. Boy George had lived in a squat with Marilyn and they had been friends for some years.

I failed to stand up or kill the rumour then, but spoke to the father of Boy George on Friday. Still no confirmation. Marilyn is still alive, as I write.

24 January was to be seminal in terms of my slight – all things are relative – Fleet Street success. I was sent out to cover the first anniversary of the Wapping dispute by the *Sunday Express* as soon as I arrived for my first night shift in weeks.

I arrived at the area on The Highway near Virginia Street which led down to the main entrance of Fortress Wapping with its barbed wire protection to encounter a burgeoning riot. Police and protestors were confronting each other there and surrounding streets. Protestors retreated rapidly from makeshift barricades after throwing missiles.

‘We must remember the Chartists and all the other trade union groups who over the centuries have struggled nobly against their corrupt and greedy capitalist employers ...’

That was the gist of some of what Labour MP Tony Benn – the then hero of the left – was preaching loudly by The Highway through a loudhailer as a JCB loader, about 50 yards away, was overturned by rioters who then tried to set it on fire.

It was totally surreal; he was ignoring the disruption close by and proceeding as normal with his pre-rehearsed speech about the history of British labour protesting. He went on and on. A disconnect from reality.

Reportedly, 168 police officers out of about 1,000 were injured in the fighting as well as scores of the estimated 13,000 demonstrators. I did not see any suffer serious injuries.

The violence petered out about 11 pm. I finally linked up with *Sunday Express* reporter Ian Malcolm who had been sent a little earlier than me to cover the anniversary demonstration. We went for a welcome, wind-down drink at the Ivories cocktail bar.

It was of course very strange seeing Wapping for so long from the outside. There was a small chance that some printer

might recognise me from driving in. That would have been tricky.

Sadly for Ian and I, all our best efforts at furiously filing copy from phone boxes (no mobile phones then of course) only resulted in two (long) paragraphs on the front page: 'Police hurt at Wapping'

However, my efforts did result in me getting shifts every Saturday at the Sunday paper - day or evening - and then becoming part-time staff. I would often go for a break with the others in the nearby Pops (Popinjay), the main pub frequented by Express journalists.

With my impeccable good timing, I missed being sent to Ostend on the evening of 6 March by Alec Williamson on the *Sunday Express* newsdesk. The ferry Herald of Free Enterprise had capsized as it was leaving Zeebrugge leading to the loss of 193 lives. I had ignored an earlier message from *The Sun* on my answerphone, involving a call to head to the office.

I had been at a party of a former London Newspaper Group colleague Nick Long when I returned to find Alec's message on the machine. I would not have been in a very fit state anyway to have made my way to Belgium as quickly as possible.

Consequently, I just spent a long day at the office 'churning out rewrites of PA (*Press Association*) and other copy all day.' That was the most intense shift since the riot outside Wapping.

From mid-January I started doing shifts on a new daily, the *London Daily News*, which I earnestly hoped would last as a rival to *The Standard*. Up to launch day - February 24 - all the writing was for dummy run editions.

Deputy news editor Roger Beam, formerly of the *Daily Mirror* and who was always full of nervous energy, called me in. Peter Lynch, ex of the *Daily Mail*, was news editor with Peter Mason and Paul Crosby also making up numbers. They

supervised a keen crew of staff and freelance reporters all hoping a slightly up-market evening paper could crack the market.

My second shift began at 6 am which was the first time that I had started so early – a real shock until I had completed a few starting then. I only snatched a couple of hours' sleep. Morven Kinlay, whom I had met on shifts at the Express titles, was also one of those hoping to land a staff job at the *LDN*. One consolation was I could work on a word processor, as at *The Sun*.

I had a nine start on launch day and was sent to Smith Square to interview bus driver brothers about ... it escapes me. However, I did notice loads of unsold *LDNs* at newsstands and agents. A portent of times to come?

The Sun kept giving me about two shifts a week – the newsdesk rated me slightly, but not that highly which suited me. I did not want to be given the 'best' assignments.

Around this time I was asked to do a story about comedian Freddie Starr which led to me calling his publicist Max Clifford. He was the brain behind the outrageous headline and story 'Freddie Starr ate my hamster'.

'Give Freddie any quote you like. He won't mind,' he blithely told me, trusting my bad taste judgement.

On 15 February I reported at *The Sun's* Ferry Aid party which took place as and after singers and celebrities arrived at the studio to record parts for the single 'Let It Be'. Money raised to go to the title's Zeebrugge Disaster Fund.

I was given a reporter to chaperone on his first shift. He seemed about 40 and must have been amazed at the experience.

I ended up none too sober, but still kept filing interviews that I had with some of the stars, including page three girls Linda Lusardi, Debee Ashby, Maria Whittaker and Suzanne Mitzi, Bucks Fizz duo Mike Nolan and singer Shelley Preston. It is not often you have the chance to talk to so many attractive

women in a couple of hours. All the girls were friendly and down-to-earth. They were all listed as backing singers.

I cheekily advised Boy George that he should try to sing in tune. He was 'very sprightly' despite his reported drug problems.

Kelvin Mackenzie and *The Sun* were on the side of the goodies for once with this fund raising.

I wrote more on the ferry disaster on the *Daily Express* during two shifts on the Monday and Wednesday following the tragedy. Although I never made it over the Channel, I had my byline in three different nationals on stories about the disaster.

Now, before the skiing season ended, I decided it was time to take a break in the Alps; I had not skied for three years and headed to Val d'Isère again – the first time in four years. I met stocky brickie Bill from Reading at the back of the coach on the journey from the airport and we ended up sharing a room.

Not the most glamorous roommate. He enjoyed belting out 'Mama' by Genesis in a high-pitched, out-of-tune voice when he had his headphones on during the coach ride back to Geneva. Luckily not during the rest of the holiday.

My first day's work back was on the *Sunday Express* with a 1 April story which might have seemed a joke. Islington Council was trying to ban comedian John Cleese from telling a baa-baa black sheep joke at its expense on TV.

He claimed that it had told a five-year-old boy that he was reciting 'a racially offensive poem'. 'It' in this case was a council-run nursery which had confused council rulings – so the council had a point, but my story still appeared.

Ten days later it was work centred round *EastEnders* again for *The Sun*. Actress Laetitia Dean was in a motorway crash and I was sent to interview her parents before heading to Elstree Studios where producer Julia Smith came to the gates and chatted in friendly fashion.

I think that she was acting as a pleasant decoy as Dean was driven out by actress Michelle Tully as we spoke. Did not want to speak to *The Sun* reporter. I did not tell the newsdesk I had been duped!

Two days later more *EastEnders* as I rewrote a *Woman's Own* interview with Pam St Clement in which she confessed to putting career ahead of kids. I have never watched one episode through even though the soap became fashionable for some intellectuals in the 1980s for its rawness and realism.

In April I succeeded in not being sent into action by the paper as a member of its Wapping task force: 'The Sun invades Germany.'

In a day shift earlier that week Kelvin Mackenzie and the newsdesk were all amused and slightly excited by the idea of despatching some reporters dressed in uniform to the offices of *Der Spiegel* in Hamburg, with a letter protesting about the theft of sunbeds by German tourists at holiday resorts.

The paper had broached the issue on 7 April with a cartoon depicting Germans: 'Ve will occupy ze sunbeds at precisely 5am.'

The issue had been treated, tongue-in-cheek, already by the German daily *Bild* and the *Daily Mail*. Mackenzie and *The Sun* decided to cover the sunbeds' scandal with force majeure for Saturday publication.

The newsdesk in jocular mood selected volunteers for the task force who included then freelancers Jamie Pyatt, Tracey Kandohla and Martin Smith. I was like a rabbit in the headlights, hoping I would not be chosen. The thought of my mother's friends Peta and Trauti in Germany reading about me ... oh dear. I was deemed not the right type of tabloid foot soldier anyway. Not called to action.

Strangely, *Der Spiegel* played along with the invasion and welcomed the task force. The games newsdesks play...

I stayed England-based and was next month on the *Daily Express*. On 13 May I found myself compromising my

educational principles ... just a mite. I wrote an article which had the headline: 'Headmaster joins exodus from the left'.

The trouble was I had not written that and the head David Evans of Langham School, Haringey, North London denied he had resigned because he felt under pressure from the left. I of course knew that an anti-left or liberal slant would be placed on these types of stories.

The next Saturday I stumbled upon a real news story, although the *Sunday Express* did not give it much prominence on its front page. I was sent to a packed 200-strong meeting of the Irish republican Wolfe Tone Society at Conway Hall, Holborn.

Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn was the most-known guest, although in the 1980s he was nowhere near as celebrated by the left as Tony Benn or Ken Livingstone.

I felt awkward before even going in because I was wearing a conservative overcoat. That already made me a bit too smart compared to the audience. But worse, below it I was wearing a suit (second-hand probably, but any suit would stand out if I took my coat off).

So the coat had to stay on and I activated a mini-cassette recorder before entering.

I got the subject of my story within the first minutes. Everyone was asked to stand up for a minute's silence to commemorate the eight IRA 'martyrs' who had been shot by the SAS in Loughgall, Northern Ireland when attacking a country police station. I stood.

He later told the meeting: 'I am happy to commemorate all those who died for an independent Ireland.'

I rushed back to the nearby office to write my piece. It only made four paragraphs on the front page with the headline: 'MP hails IRA dead.' But it has since been the subject of much speculation on the internet. Someone belonging to *newsletter.co.uk* in 2015 tracked it down in a circuitous way to its source in the Sunday paper.

It headlined its own piece: 'Night Jeremy Corbyn stood in honour of dead IRA terrorists.' Well, it was nearly all true – the time was incorrect; it was daytime.

The following Saturday my attention was forced to switch from the political to the over-the-top musical. I was sent to see the American band the Beastie Boys in concert at the Brixton Academy.

The newsdesk hoped something really outrageous would occur as the three white rappers showcase songs from their *Licensed To Ill* album. There were go-go girls in a cage to the side and a giant inflated penis, but those were not sensational enough for my story to get in the paper.

Run-DMC played after the Beastie Boys at the Academy. I did not see any angle for a story on them, but their presentation was more powerful from what I saw of them. 'Walk This Way' more hardhitting than '(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (To Party!)' By witnessing both acts, I was there at the commercial birth of hip hop in the country. Not my type of sound. Especially since I was already 35.

June found me doing a full week of 6 am starts at the *London Daily News* and I suddenly seem to have fallen more into favour since I was given stories which were given a lot of space and carried my byline.

Not on Monday when I doorstepped at the Islington home of a fraudulent head of a disabled charity. Also, doorstepping were Jamie Pyatt, of *The Sun* and highly rated, plus Jon Worsnop for an agency.

The next day I did an extended caption on a stained glass window originally from Bruges and the pictures and words were given a generous half a page.

The following shift I got the splash with fellow freelance Brent Baker after I was sent to report on an arson attack on the Tory Hackney North and Stoke Newington offices.

I interviewed Oliver Letwin, the Tory candidate for the constituency who must have welcomed the publicity because

left-wing activists would be suspects. Tory party chairman Norman Tebbit weighed in too: 'I can only assume this is the way the new Left fights elections.'

Next day I was sent to Wanstead marshes on the trail of an escaped wallaby. I crammed some puns ('hopping mad') into the piece about the animal belonging to a circus in North London.

Twenty-four hours later I shared the splash again in a piece about an explosion caused by gas cylinders near Waterloo station injuring three – this time with staff reporters Paul Cheston and Jeff Edwards. The Friday ended with me helping man *The Sun* newsdesk.

On Election Day 11 June I wrote a bylined piece for the *Daily Express* pointing out that the real winners would be the pollsters because of the money that they were earning. The following day comprised election coverage at the same title, before an evening shift at *The Sun*. There was the odd glass of champagne because Margaret Thatcher had won for the third time.

At the end of June I encountered actress and singer Patsi Kensit. She was a friend of stunt rider Eddie Kidd who was preparing for one such stunt at the nearby Isle of Dogs. She was accompanied by Roger Moore's younger son Geoffrey and appeared somewhat bored of bike proceedings. Once back in the office, the newsdesk decided it was not interested in any copy.

As I was driving on Saturday morning, I found myself listening to a Genesis concert broadcast live from Wembley Stadium when singer Phil Collins cheerfully harangued some reluctant fans to punch the air. He swore twice, repeating: 'I bet they think they're too fucking cool to join in.'

I had a final evening shift at *The Sun* and duly offered it as a story, especially since Princess Diana and Prince Charles had been in the audience. It made a page lead.

I was able to read the headline over a sunbather's shoulder on the crowded beach in Dassia, Corfu. I flew to the island on Tuesday (my first visit in 15 years) to arrive at a small, crowded airport. Having been shown my room, I headed to the beach where a man was perusing my page lead 'Rude Rocker Gives Di A Real Earful!'

Well, that is the only time that has happened. At a more rarified level, a novelist must enjoy seeing someone absorbed in his or her novel.

During my March ski holiday, I had for the first time on a ski break felt removed from the raucous drunken japes on the last night in Val d'Isere. Icelandic Benny was manically twirling a woman Peggy all over the dance floor. Peggy proceeded to think it was funny to pour beer all over the chef's head. Benny carried on being 'continuously crude', shouting subtleties such as 'Get it on.'

It was the same in Corfu where resorts close to the airport had expanded dramatically to cater mainly for young, free-and-easy Brits. I went out in the evenings, drank my fill and linked up with a group or two - but I was getting a little weary of that type of social scene. I was even having to go to the Club 18-30 party night under false pretences!

Once again an episode underlined why I was not a fully go-to tabloid hack. I noticed Queens Park Rangers footballer Mark Dennis was holidaying at the resort; he had featured in a tabloid story or two and was maybe seeing a new woman. I thought of probing away, but did not - he was known as 'Psycho' for his take-no-prisoners attitude on the pitch.

On my second shift back at the *London Daily News*, I wrote a page lead with Ed Gorman in which *Spy Catcher* author Peter Wright accused Margaret Thatcher of 'being a bitch' for trying to sabotage publication of his book in America. I interviewed him on the phone at his home in Australia. Ed soon left to carry out hazardous freelance work in Afghanistan; at one point his translator was killed by him.

After work I found myself chatting to reporter John Passmore in a group at The Cartoonist. He had left the *Daily Mail* to join the new paper. I do not think that I told him that I thought I was given a trial run of shifts on the *Daily Mail* five years earlier to see if I could write 'colour' pieces as successfully as him. The newsdesk decided not. We had both been to Charterhouse.

The next Sunday found me on the controversial Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham, North London where PC Keith Blakelock had been hacked to death in October 1985. I was to cover a meeting on racism. Lord Gifford, who represented defendants in the riot case urged a demonstration at the appeal of three men jailed for killing him. One defendant was Winston Silcott.

As I left, I bumped into Rita Ord who was directing a documentary about the estate. I had not seen her since 1976 when I rushed to her parents' apartment near Portobello Road to inform the carnival goers there that a riot had broken out. It was the first large disturbance at the Notting Hill carnival.

The next day I doorstepped St Stephen's Hospital in Fulham a second time; a patient was Iranian opposition leader Amir Parviz who had been the victim of a car bomb. We doorsteppers persuaded his wife Homa to take a bedside photo of him as he recovered.

I was establishing myself at the evening paper and maybe, if not close to a staff job, not so far off. I was better placed than at *The Sun* or *Daily Express*. However, owner Robert Maxwell put an end to any possibility of that.

Four days later – on 24 July – employees were summoned for a meeting with him.

'I've something sad but not shocking to announce: the paper closes today.' The burly, even massive, Maxwell blamed distribution problems rather than the content.

A distressed female – not a journalist – said she had only just given up another job to work at the daily.

‘When you make an omelette, you have to break eggs,’ he pontificated.

Roger Beam from the newsdesk doughtily defended the editorial content of the paper, attacking the poor distribution. He was not going to change Maxwell’s mind.

‘That’s life.’

And that was the end of the title with consequent chaos in the office as all sized up their futures. I remember a photo of a despondent Brent Baker appearing in a Sunday broadsheet.

I quickly did my expenses for my last 16 shifts and got personal assistant Karen to register three weeks of shifts. I called the *Daily Express* to explain the situation. The newsdesk called me straight in for a shift – a sympathy shift maybe! I did not remain highly rated.

A few days later I received a kind, round robin letter from editor Magnus Linklater thanking all of us for our ‘dedication and enthusiasm’.

‘I would like to say how sorry I am personally that we did not have more time to prove ourselves ... Speaking for myself, I have never worked on a paper with quite the same spirit as this one. It was fun as well as hard work,’ he wrote.

However, I now had to carry on ... on one less title. Now there were three.

Chapter Three: It's your funeral...

July - December 1987

...